

Early Ogle County

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In the area of Ogle County before any whites had settled, it consisted of clear streams, a number of groves, and large expanses of prairie. Indians used to burn the prairie so it was easier for them to hunt. There were not many trees on the prairies because the prairie grass had such a thick root system it would not allow anything to grow. If a seedling started to grow, the fires from the Indians burned it. Ogle County was not just prairie; it had many trees in some areas. Where there were trees there was no undergrowth beneath them. The terrain was 58 percent prairie, 21 percent timber, and the rest was terrace soils, swamps, and bottomland.

The first white men to set foot on what is now Ogle County were French fur traders and trappers. These men gave the large bend in the Rock River its name Grand De Tour. On the other side of Grand De Tour lived Pierre LaSallier, a French fur trader. He arrived there sometime between 1800 and 1818. He was a guide for Major Stephen Long, who came from Fort Dearborn on a trip to Prairie du Chien in 1823. These white men were the first to go overland through this area. Pierre's wife was an Indian like many of the fur traders' wives. His daughter was the wife of Joe Ogee. Joe ran the first ferry across Rock River.

The tip of Illinois was part of the Northwest Territory. In 1801 it was called Saint Clair County, which was a part of the Indian Territory. It changed hands many times from Madison County to Putnam County. In January 1836, the legislature formed Ogle

County, which was suggested by Thomas Ford in memory of Captain Joseph Ogle, who distinguished himself for his courage and coolness in the siege of Fort Henry in the early days of the country's history.

When word was sent back to relatives and friends about the wonderful Rock River Valley, immigration began to increase. Newspapers ran articles about the fertile Rock River Valley and how to get there. The immigrants traveled in wagons, some with horses, but most with oxen since they were cheaper and easier to feed. The Panic of 1837 was another factor that contributed to the immigration to Ogle County. The panic caused many people to move to a new place.

The same act that created Ogle County, stipulated that commissioners be appointed to locate the county seat. There was a quarter section of land that was to be sold off in lots. The money raised would be used to build the court house and the county jail. There was a large Indian mound on the county square where the buildings were to be built. It had to be leveled by Joseph Knox in July 1839. The first county building that was built was the jail in 1840. It was a two-story stone building. The building was only eighteen square feet. This jail did not prove to be very safe. A prisoner dug his way out with an old jack knife in less than an hour. With the gang activity surrounding the jail it was necessary to build a jail that was safer. In 1846 a second jail was built costing \$1,990. This one was used until a sheriff's residence and jail costing nearly \$20,000, was built in 1874.

The first court house was built in March 1841. It was a two-story brick building. On March 21, the day before court convened, the court house was set on fire and it burned to the ground. It was set on fire by six of the "Prairie Bandits" whose comrades were in jail.

They thought that burning it down would destroy all the records and they could set their friends free. But all the court records were at home with the clerk. A second court house was built. After proving to be too small and inadequate, the present court house was built in 1892. It cost \$100,000.

Ogle County began to grow rapidly. With all the people moving into the area creating towns. These people did not have televisions or a radio. Social life with friends and neighbors was an important factor in the growth of Ogle County. Barn raisings were something for the people to do. The men built the barns and the women cooked for them. Weddings were always a festive occasion. There were quilting bees, spelling bees, threshing bees, and there was always a big dinner that followed after each event. The first band in the county was organized in Mt. Morris in 1845.

Still more and more people come to Ogle County especially for festive reasons like Autumn On Parade held in Oregon. The Ogle County fair draws many peoples attention. It seems to be the cross roads of Northern Illinois. [From City of Oregon, "Attractions," www.oregonil.com/attractions.asp, (Sept. 24, 2002) Ogle County Board, *Bicentennial History of Ogle County*; Welcome to Ogle County, "History," www.oglecounty.org/, (Sept. 24, 2002).]